

In the abundance of theological material from the pen of the famous 16<sup>th</sup>-century Reformer John Calvin, perhaps no topic in his writings was given more focus than the biblical doctrine of the eternal God. Calvin taught and wrote that God is central to all true theology.

Often, the “theocentric”<sup>1</sup> nature of Calvin’s theology has been noted. This God-central focus is certainly born out in Calvin’s commentaries, sermons, as well as his renowned *Institutes of Christian Religion*. Patterned after the “Apostles Creed,” Calvin sets forth the nature and work of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit in most pages contained in three of the *Institutes*’ four volumes.<sup>2</sup> In the very beginning of the *Institutes* Calvin instructed his readers that the knowledge of God is very closely related to the knowledge that a person has of him or herself. In every edition of the *Institutes*, starting in the 1536 edition and leading to the sixth and final edition of 1559, Calvin’s famous opening sentence<sup>3</sup> could be read. He writes, “Nearly all wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”<sup>4</sup> Though with some minor revision, the continuity of this phrase throughout all of the *Institutes*’ editions highlights the importance the Reformer gave to God’s revelation of Himself and the cruciality of man’s knowledge of that revelation.

God’s revelation is the central need and well-spring of man’s knowledge of Himself. This particularly applies to God’s written revelation in Calvin’s writings, namely the sixty-six canonical books comprised in Holy Scripture. While Calvin focuses the lion’s share of his

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Thomas, “*Calvin’s Teaching on Job*,” (Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publishing, 2004), 43.

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps better known as “Books” in the *Institutes of Christian Religion*.

<sup>3</sup> In the Battles translation of the *Institutes of Christian Religion* on page thirty-six and footnote three mention is made of three revisions to the opening sentence. Calvin never altered the main emphasis of this sentence. <sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.1.1

writings on God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, this primary knowledge of the triune God is founded upon the inerrancy and authority of the Word of God. Thus, early in *Institutes*<sup>4</sup>, Calvin gives his attention to the absolute necessity and primacy of Scripture. Yet it is not uncommon, both in our own day and in past generations, to find evangelical and non-evangelical writers questioning Calvin's position on "Sola Scriptura,"<sup>5</sup> or Scripture Alone. For example, in one well-known Christian magazine, we read an article entitled "The Bible Alone? Not for John Calvin!"<sup>6</sup> The author questions the veracity of stating that Calvin would have concurred with later 17<sup>th</sup>-century reformed scholars who succinctly explained and wrote on the doctrine of plenary and verbal inspiration.<sup>7</sup> We must then ask, what is the truth regarding this matter? This paper's objective is to answer this question by an examination of John Calvin's doctrine of Scripture. This paper contends that Calvin indeed held to today's orthodox position of verbal inerrancy. Calvin would have whole-heartedly embraced the Apostle Paul's words to the young Timothy; "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17)."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In the *Institutes*, Calvin addresses the doctrine of Holy Scripture in Book 1, chapters six through ten.

<sup>5</sup> A Latin phrase and one of the five "Solae" of the Protestant Reformation. The others are: Sola Fide (by faith alone), Sola Christus (by Christ alone), Sola Gratia (by grace alone), and Soli Deo Gloria, (glory to God alone).

<sup>6</sup> Armstrong, Chris. "The Bible Alone? Not for John Calvin." Christianity Today. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/news/2004/jan16.html> (accessed August 8, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> In the website article Armstrong conveys the notion that since Calvin held a high esteem for certain church fathers, and frequently used their source materials, this detracts from a position on Scripture alone! <sup>9</sup> All cited Scripture in this paper will be taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

## The Necessity of Scripture<sup>8</sup>

John Calvin was abundantly clear regarding his adherence to the necessity of the Holy Scripture. Calvin writes, “Now, in order that true religion may shine upon us, we ought to hold that it must take its beginning from heavenly doctrine and that no one can get even the slightest taste of right and sound doctrine unless he is a pupil of Scripture. Hence, there also emerges the beginning of true understanding when we reverently embrace what pleases God there to witness of himself.”<sup>9</sup> Like the famous older Reformer and later contemporary, Martin Luther,<sup>10</sup>

Calvin insisted upon the necessity of the Word of God. The battles Luther fought against the Roman church holding to their parity of church traditions with Scripture was also the battle Calvin undertook. Similar to Bunyan’s Mr. Valiant-for-truth,<sup>11</sup> Calvin fought tooth and nail for the primacy of God’s Word.

Calvin was mindful that although God reveals himself in His creation, it is not sufficient for eternal salvation.<sup>12</sup> This is due to the tendency of the human mind to forget God. In other words, the damage done by the entrance of sin into the heart of man absolutely necessitates God’s written revelation. He writes, “It is therefore clear that God has provided by the assistance of the Word for the sake of all those to whom he has been pleased to give useful instruction

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<sup>8</sup> Typically, “Sola Scriptura” is meant by at least these four headings: 1) necessity of Scripture, 2) authority of Scripture, 3) sufficiency of Scripture, and 4) the perspicuity of Scripture. Each will be examined in the light of Calvin’s theological writings.

<sup>9</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1.6.2

<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther died in February of 1546. Calvin, who was born in 1509, lived another eighteen years after Luther’s death. Calvin’s death occurred in May of 1564.

<sup>11</sup> Character in *Pilgrim’s Progress* written by John Bunyan.

<sup>12</sup> Calvin nevertheless believed man to be without excuse! See Romans chapter one. <sup>15</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1.6.3

because he foresaw that his likeness imprinted upon the most beautiful form of the universe would be insufficiently effective.”<sup>15</sup>

According to Holy Scripture, the Bible is imperative for man’s salvation. In the words of the Apostle Peter, “Since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Peter 1:23). Calvin references Psalm 19 in which an announcement is made that “the heavens declare the glory of God” (Psalm 19:1). Calvin stresses the vital importance of the second stanza in Psalm 19 which states, “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul” (Psalm 19:7). He writes, “God in vain calls all peoples to himself by the contemplation of heaven and earth, this is the very school of God’s children.”<sup>13</sup> Calvin repeatedly labored and stressed that in both the Old and New Testaments God established His Word in written form so that an accurate knowledge of Himself would be available to mankind. Calvin compared the Bible to a pair of spectacles (eyeglasses). Its necessity for one poor in sight is self-evident. He writes, “Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God.”<sup>14</sup>

## **The Authority of Scripture**

In Calvin’s commentary on the second epistle to Timothy, he provides his thoughts on the Apostle’s words, “All Scripture is breathed out by God,” found in 2 Timothy 3:16. In doing so, he provides a sampling of his position on the authority of Holy Scripture. He writes, “In order

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 1.6.4

<sup>14</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1.6.1

to uphold the authority of Scripture, he declares that it is divinely inspired; for, if it be so, it is beyond all controversy that men ought to receive it with reverence. This is a principle which distinguishes our religion from all others, that we know God hath spoken to us, and are fully convinced that the prophets did not speak at their own suggestion, but that, being organs of the Holy Spirit, they only uttered what they had been commissioned from heaven to declare.”<sup>15</sup>

One could reasonably ask if the authority of Scripture is implied in the necessity of Scripture. To help answer that question, John W. Robbins, in an article from the website journal “The Trinity Review” provides a helpful statement. Robbins, writing on the authority of the bible in the days of both Martin Luther and John Calvin, says, “The Scriptures are necessary because an authoritative self-revelation of God is necessary for men. However, we need to distinguish between authority and necessity. Martin Luther’s contemporaries admitted the Bible’s necessity, but his insistence upon its authority brought them into serious conflict with the Reformer.”<sup>16</sup> The Roman Catholic Church was not averse to declaring the necessity of Scripture. In some regards, they might even acknowledge the authority of Scripture if church dogma and tradition were considered co-equal at the same time! This is where one of the key battlelines of the Reformation was drawn: Scripture alone being the war cry! Man must be subject and obedient to God’s written revelation. Calvin and other Reformers would have echoed Luther’s famous defense before the emperor. “My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for going against my conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me.

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<sup>15</sup> John Calvin, Calvin’s Commentaries Vol. XXI, *Commentary on the Second Epistle to Timothy*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 248-249

<sup>16</sup> Robbins, John. “Luther and Calvin on the Authority of the Bible.” The Trinity Foundation. <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/journal.php?id=178> (accessed August 9, 2014).

Amen.”<sup>17</sup> His conscience was captive to the Word of God because he recognized the authority of that Word! Like Luther, Calvin would not tolerate anyone putting themselves on par, or above, Holy Scripture. In the *Institutes*, he writes, “Hence the Scriptures obtain full authority among believers only when men regard them as having sprung from heaven as if there the living words of God were heard.”<sup>21</sup>

Calvin believed that the church of Jesus Christ is grounded upon Scripture and not human authorities. He quotes from the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, reminding his readers of the church’s foundation:

“So, then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord (Ephesians 2:19 -21).

Calvin did not agree that the church judges Scripture or can place itself above the Word of God. No human authority has that ability.<sup>18</sup> He writes, “It is utterly vain to pretend that the power of judging Scripture so lies with the church that its certainty depends upon churchly assent. Thus, while the church receives and gives its seal of approval to the Scriptures, it does not thereby render authentic what is otherwise doubtful or controversial.”<sup>23</sup>

Calvin believed that “Scripture bears its own authentication.”<sup>19</sup> It is not the role of man to demand proof, or is it required to reason with people that the Bible has authority. The Word of God brings to man the testimony of the Holy Spirit. Calvin writes, “Let this point therefore stand that those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught truly rest upon Scripture, and that

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<sup>17</sup> Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1977), 180 <sup>21</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1.7.1

<sup>18</sup> This would have been directly opposed to the teaching of Rome which held that the authority of the pope is equivalent to the teaching of the Bible! This doctrine would have been in line with Rome’s adherence to the teaching of apostolic succession. <sup>23</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1.7.2

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 1.7.5

Scripture, indeed, is self-authenticated; hence, it is not right to subject it to proof and reasoning. And the certainty it deserves with us, it attains by the testimony of the Spirit.”<sup>20</sup> Calvin believed that when God speaks in His Word, those who are made in His image, and our His sheep<sup>21</sup>, hear His voice. In this sense, the authority of the Word of God is intrinsic and inherent to God’s people. Robert Raymond provides a helpful analysis of Calvin’s belief in this area of authentication. He writes, “By asserting that Scripture is *autopiston*, that is, ‘self-authenticated,’ Calvin asserted the self-attesting character of Holy Scripture. He not only clearly understood that the Bible is man’s only foundation for the certainty of knowledge but also recognized that the Word of God would, of necessity, have to be self-attesting, carrying within itself its own divine *indicia* (see Westminster Confession of Faith 1.5), for if it needed anyone or anything other than itself to authenticate and validate its divine character, based on the principle that the validation sources is always higher and final authority (see Heb. 6:13), it would not be the Word of God because the validation source would be the higher authority.”<sup>22</sup> We close this section with a final word from Calvin himself. Lest anyone doubt Calvin’s view of the authority of Scripture, these words will persuade otherwise! He writes, “Before I go any farther, it is worthwhile to say something about the authority of Scripture, not only to prepare our hearts to reverence it, but to banish all doubt. When that which is set forth is acknowledged to be the Word of God, there is no one so deplorably insolent-unless devoid also both of common sense and humanity itself-as to dare impugn the credibility of Him who speaks.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> John 10:27

<sup>22</sup> Robert L. Raymond, “Calvin’s Doctrine of Holy Scripture,” in *Theological Guide to Calvin’s Institutes*, ed. David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback, (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2008), 51.

<sup>23</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1.7.1

## The Sufficiency of Scripture

The Sufficiency of Scripture denies that man's teachings and traditions should be in any way, shape, or form mixed with the Word of God. This is to say there is no warrant to supplement Scripture with additional teachings. Holy Scripture is sufficient to lead mankind to salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ. Calvin was diametrically opposed to the Roman Catholic teaching that claimed superiority or equality with the Bible. This, of course, highlights one of the key distinctions between Protestant and Catholic doctrine. In Section One, Chapter Two, Article Two of the "Catechism of the Catholic Church," the topic "Transmission of Divine Revelation,"<sup>24</sup> is addressed. Number ninety-seven states, "Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God in which, as in a mirror, the pilgrim Church contemplates God, the source of all her riches."<sup>30</sup> How contrary this catechism language is to Calvin's beliefs! Commenting on the text of 2 Timothy 3:16, Calvin writes, "Whoever then wishes to profit in the Scriptures, let him, first of all, lay down this as a settled point, that the Law and Prophets are not a doctrine delivered according to the will and pleasure of men but dictated by the Holy Spirit."<sup>25</sup> Calvin believed that the apostles were "genuine scribes of the Holy Spirit."<sup>26</sup> Subsequent to this, referring to the ministry of the apostles of Christ, he adds, "Their writings are therefore to be considered oracles of God."<sup>27</sup>

Since Scripture is of divine origin, the Word of God is sufficient to lead us to Christ and to keep us walking in the paths of righteousness. The Holy Spirit is the witness to the believer of the truth of the Bible. Calvin writes in the *Institutes*, "The Holy Spirit so inheres in His truth,

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<sup>24</sup> "Catechism of the Catholic Church,"

[http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/pls1c2a2.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/pls1c2a2.htm) (accessed August 11, 2014). <sup>30</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Second Epistle to Timothy*, 249

<sup>26</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 4.8.9

<sup>27</sup> Ibid



which He expresses in Scripture, that only when its proper reverence and dignity are given to the Word does the Holy Spirit show forth His power.”<sup>28</sup> Timothy George, writing in *Theology of the Reformers*, reflects on Calvin’s view of Scripture and the witness of the Holy Spirit. He writes, “All of Calvin’s theology was carried out within these bounds: the objectivity of God’s revelation in Holy Scripture and the confirming, illuminating witness of the Holy Spirit in the believer.”<sup>29</sup>

Thus, we can say with all certainty that within Calvin’s theology, the inseparability of the Spirit and the Word of God is undeniable. Benjamin B. Warfield writing on Calvin’s doctrine of Scripture states, “Calvin does not present special revelation, or the Scriptures as special revelation documented, as the entire cure, but places by the side of it the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti*.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, Calvin declares that the inner witness of the Holy Spirit goes hand in hand with the Word of God. Robert Reymond provides a helpful summary. “In sum, Calvin argues in 1.9 that the Spirit without the Word is a delusion, and the Word without the Spirit is dead. Word and Spirit ever belong together and must never be separated.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, the Word of God, inspired and attended by God the Holy Spirit, is sufficient for the needs of the soul of man.

## **The Perspicuity<sup>32</sup> of Scripture**

In addition to the necessity, authority, and sufficiency of Scripture, the war cry of the Reformation, “Sola Scriptura,” encompasses the inherent clarity, or perspicuity, of God’s written revelation. During the Reformation era, the Roman Catholic Church, as it had for prior

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<sup>28</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1.9.3

<sup>29</sup> Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1988), 198

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956), 69

<sup>31</sup> Reymond, *Calvin’s Doctrine of Holy Scripture*, 55

<sup>32</sup> Meaning fundamental clarity, in the context of Scripture, it means the readily understood nature of the Word of God.

centuries, was prone to assign the reading and interpretation of Scripture to the clergy. The common laity was not considered qualified to read or comment on Scripture. This offered a distinct advantage to the Magisterium<sup>33</sup>, who constantly looked for anyone who dared to question their authority or even challenge their biblical interpretations. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Roman authorities were leery of the legacies left by renowned bible translators, such as John Wycliffe<sup>40</sup> and William Tyndale<sup>34</sup>. Under the blessings of God, these men had great success in providing copies of the Word of God in the common language of their day. The results were phenomenal! Legions of souls came to see that salvation is in Christ alone! All of this created great consternation for the Roman authorities, who pronounced themselves the “keepers” of God’s revelation!

In his writings and preaching, Calvin expressed confidence that the Word of God is made understandable to men by the work of the Spirit. He expresses his belief that God has accommodated<sup>35</sup> truths of Scripture so that He can be comprehended. God has accommodated for the benefit of mankind. Calvin writes, “For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to ‘lisp’ in speaking to us? Thus, such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity.”<sup>36</sup> Timothy George comments on this well-known quote to highlight this perspicuity and accommodation of the Word of God. He writes, “Here

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<sup>33</sup> In Catholicism, the Magisterium is the authority that determines what is and what is not the authentic teachings within the Church. In other words, the ecclesiastical “experts,” such as, the Pontiff, Cardinals, and Bishops, etc. <sup>40</sup> John Wycliffe born 1320, died 1384. In many ways Wycliffe, and those who followed him, known as Lollards, set the stage for the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformation!

<sup>34</sup> William Tyndale born 1494, died 1536. Tyndale’s bible translation was the first translation taken directly from the Hebrew and Greek source text. As a result of the printing press, large numbers of the Tyndale Bible were distributed. This was very much to the dismay of Rome!

<sup>35</sup> Divine accommodation means that God has condescended so that man might know Him. It is a theological principle that did not originate with Calvin but is perhaps most associated with him.

<sup>36</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1.13.1

God was likened to a nurse engaged in baby talk with infants! The Bible, too, was a kind of divine baby talk.”<sup>3738</sup> As a result of God’s gracious accommodation, both scholars and children can hear and understand the gospel message. Indeed, even during the earthly ministry of the Incarnate Word of God, He gladly received children and urged them to come to him.

“Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:14). In the language of Calvin, found in a sermon on Job 38:1-4,<sup>45</sup> he declared that God is the “fcholemayfter of the lowly and little ones.”<sup>39</sup> This heavenly schoolmaster<sup>40</sup> has provided both profundity and simplicity in His Holy Word, leading men, women, boys, and girls to saving faith in Christ the Redeemer!

## Summary

This paper has attempted to present John Calvin’s doctrine of Holy Scripture as an orthodox and reformed position. It must be stated that Calvin was a man of his own unique age. His primary, God-ordained task was that of Pastor and, broadly speaking, his leadership position in advancing the Protestant Reformation. The Reformed dogmaticians of the later 17<sup>th</sup> century and their subsequent writings on the doctrine of plenary, verbal inspiration, were not a principle focus in Calvin’s generation. Chris Armstrong, whose article in *Christianity Today* was quoted earlier, and other recent day writers and theologians seeking to analyze Calvin’s position on Scripture would do well to remember that fact. Professor John Murray,<sup>41</sup> commenting on an

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<sup>37</sup> George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 193.

<sup>38</sup> facsimile edition published by Banner of Truth Trust. Text is in Elizabethan English.

<sup>39</sup> John Calvin, *Sermons of Job* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1993), 689

<sup>40</sup> Along with “spectacles,” “schoolmaster” is another favorite term utilized by Calvin in many of his theological writings.

<sup>41</sup> John Murray, the long tenured, prolific, and beloved systematic theology professor at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, PA. Murray taught at the school from 1930 to his retirement in 1966. In Vol. 4 of Murray’s *Collected Writings*, there are two beneficial studies on Calvin’s doctrine of Scripture.

analysis done by Edward Dowey,<sup>42</sup> whose detailed examination of Calvin's doctrine of Scripture was completed in the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, provides a helpful summary statement. Dowey addresses the charge that Calvin did not adhere to inerrancy. Mr. Dowey wrote, "There is no hint anywhere in Calvin's writings that the original text contained any flaws at all. The important thing to realize is that according to Calvin, the Scriptures were so given that – whether by 'literal' or 'figurative' dictation – the result was a series of documents errorless in their original form."<sup>43</sup> It is interesting to note that Dowey himself did not accept complete biblical inerrancy. Yet Robert Reymond conveys that Dowey was convinced that Calvin did accept inerrancy! Reymond writes, "While he<sup>44</sup> did not accept the inerrancy of the Bible's autographs himself, Edward A. Dowey Jr. provides an honest conclusion by acknowledging Calvin not only 'conceived the Scriptures as literally dictated by God,' but also as inerrant in the autographs..."<sup>45</sup>

We close this paper with an important reminder that Calvin's desire was to exalt and glorify the Christ revealed in the Scriptures. His doctrine of Scripture was intimately tied to his belief in the Word of God Incarnate. This is expressed clearly in Calvin's comments within the preface to Pierre-Robert Olivetan's 1535 translation of the New Testament. Calvin writes, "This is what we should, in short, seek in the whole of Scripture: truly to know Jesus Christ and the infinite riches that are comprised in him and are offered to us by him from God the Father. If one were to sift thoroughly the Law and Prophets, he would not find a single word which would not

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<sup>42</sup> Edward Dowey Jr. wrote a book entitled *Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*. The book was first published in 1952.

<sup>43</sup> John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Vol. 4, Studies in Theology, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 158.

<sup>44</sup> A reference to Edward Dowey Jr.

<sup>45</sup> Reymond, *Calvin's Doctrine of Holy Scripture*, 59

draw and bring us to him ...Therefore, rightly does Saint Paul say in another passage that he would know nothing except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”<sup>46</sup> To this, we say, Amen!

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<sup>46</sup> Taylor, Justin. “Calvin on Christ in all of Scripture.” The Gospel Coalition.  
<http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2013/01/09/calvin-on-christ-in-all-of-scripture/> (accessed August 14, 2014).

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